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ABSTRACT

This paper presents 15 questions for educators and administrators to ask themselves in designing and implementing inclusive and collaborative school programs. Questions, and the accompanying answers, cover such issues as funding, parental support, district philosophy, support for teachers, service delivery, teacher attitudes, regular education student and staff preparation, and program evaluation. Together, the questions are intended to guide the planning process and create a solid proactive foundation for the collaborative development and implementation of inclusive education programs. (PB)

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Key Questions Related to Inclusion and Collaboration in the Schools

Lorna Idol, Ph.D.

I would like to set forth 15 key questions that will help in building a framework for how to construct inclusive and collaborative schools. This formulation is based on my experiences as an educational consultant working with school staff who working to develop responsible inclusive and collaborative schools.

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1. So, what is inclusion?

Inclusion is when a student with special learning and behavior needs is educated in the general education program, full-time. There is no such thing as partial inclusion, as this is simply more of what has been done for a long time in the name of mainstreaming.

It is very important for inclusion decisions to be made on a child-by-child basis by teams of professionals and parents working together. For each student the team must decide whether the inclusion will be for academic or social learning or a combination. When this is not done, problems arise with discrepancies about what is appropriate inclusion among the team members.

2. Has the district developed a philosophical position on inclusion?

Sometimes, this is neglected with individuals or individual school staffs developing their own philosophies, which results in sending mixed and inconsistent messages to the community and to teachers and administrators within the system. Another problem that can arise is a resulting and somewhat unhealthy competition

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among individual schools and principals?

3. **Does the district have parental support?**

It is important to use a task force of parents and educators to serve in an advisory capacity to the district and to the experimental inclusion programs. Taking a planned and proactive stance is highly preferable to offering inclusion in defense to parental pressure. Some districts where the parents are split on the issue of inclusion, offer a bit of the old and a bit of the new, at least initially. That is, giving parents an option of placing their students in integrated or segregated schooling situation. Some important parts of developing an effective parental support system is to solicit parental input and feedback and to invite parents to school to observe and to participate, making a conscious effort to garner parental support.

4. **Does the district have the money to do it?**

Responsible inclusion programs are not inexpensive. A responsible program includes offering classroom teachers a variety of support systems [see question #7]. Some districts move to offering inclusion because it's the morally right position to take with no thought for costs; some are doing it because it might be less expensive, thinking that fewer support staff will be needed. Actually, if inclusion is offered responsibly and well, it is costly. Some districts and some individual schools are achieving better cost accommodations by building community/business/school partnerships, with the partners donating money and services to the programs.

5. **How are teachers being supported?**

Teachers must be supported in a variety of ways if they are to react to inclusion favorably. One very important way is to

offer comprehensive staff development in essential areas such as (1) effective instruction of difficult-to-teach students in general education [see Idol & West, 1993], (2) developing collaborative skills in communicating, interacting, problem solving, and team decision making [see West, Idol & Cannon, 1989], (3) key issues in program development and implementation [see Idol & West, 1991 and West & Idol, 1990], and (4) exploring, sharing, and reconciling intrapersonal attitudes and beliefs related to inclusion [see Idol, Nevin & Paolucci-Whitcomb, 1994]. Another is to provide ways for teachers to use peer coaching, teaching and providing feedback to another. Another is to make a conscious effort to build a truly collegial staff. Another is for the staff to define and agree on a variety of service delivery options with district support for each of these options.

6. Are faculty provided with sufficient time to collaborate?

There is a very strong tendency for school staff to identify lack of time to collaborate as the primary reason why they can't do so. Sufficient time must be provided for collaboration. West and Idol (1990, p. 30) identified 11 different solutions that various school staff have found for this problem.

7. Can you count the number of ways that service delivery is provided to support inclusion?

In my experience using only one way of providing supportive special education service delivery to classroom teachers is simply not sufficient. In schools I've worked with we try to build a combined program that includes cooperative teaching, consulting teaching, instructional assistants in the classroom, and teams of teachers providing planning and problem solving

assistance to classroom teachers.

8. Is an effective school-wide discipline plan in place?

Along with providing sufficient time to collaborate, having an effective school-wide discipline plan in place is essential to responsible inclusion. Students who are not well disciplined are often not learning, are sometimes preventing others from learning, are sometimes creating havoc in classrooms; all of which results in frustrated classroom teachers who have been pushed to far to even consider inclusion on top of the chaos.

9. What about the attitudes and beliefs of the teachers?

An important element in bringing about effective change is to provide and build a collegial atmosphere for supporting teachers in sharing their intrapersonal attitudes and beliefs. Hoping these attitudes and beliefs will simply go away or hoping they will influence others over time is simply not enough. People need safe professional environments (collaborative teams and pairs of teachers) where these attitudes and beliefs can be explored, shared, challenged, restructured, rethought, etc. Kept under repression, the negative ones can be corrosive to efforts to include as well as spread in a contagious fashion among the rest of the staff.

10. Are the other students prepared?

The other students in the class where inclusion is to take place must be educated about the handicapping difficulties of the included student in a healthy, positive, and nurturing way. In my experience I have found students to be generally less resistant to inclusion that some adults. Children are naturally kind and can be incredibly supportive of one another, especially under firm, positive, and strong teacher leadership.

11. Does everybody know what they are supposed to do?

Each staff must collectively define the various roles of the adults involved in the inclusive and collaborative effort. Problems arise when there are discrepant ideas as to what the roles of one another are among school staff.

12. Do teams and pairs know how to work together?

It is important to recognize that skills are necessary in order to work effectively on a collaborative team, be it for planning, teaching, decision making, evaluating, etc. In my experiences, comprehensive staff development is the areas of effective communication, team interaction, and team decision making skills is a important first step in effective staff development and program implementation [see West et al., 1989].

13. Do the faculty know what to do in the classrooms?

In my experience faculty are sometimes unsure of **what** to do to accommodate and include the challenged student in the classroom. The answer to this lies is a combination of relevant needs assessment, staff development, and offering various kinds of support to the teacher. The needs assessment can be of faculty strengths and weaknesses in planning, assessing, teaching, disciplining, managing the instructional environment, making materials and instructional modifications, and evaluating progress [see Idol & West, 1993]. Sometimes modeling and/or coaching in the classroom are all that are needed for programs to be implemented. During field consultations I find myself doing much of this by teacher request and choice.

14. Are faculty or parents particularly resistant to including students with certain types of handicapping conditions?

Sometimes we, as adults, bring particular beliefs and

prejudices toward certain kinds of handicapping conditions that we are barely aware of ourselves. These may be due to lack of exposure, ignorance, past experiences, etc. What is critical is creating an ambience that is conducive to sharing these fears and feelings. I've found that, in general, when teachers are asked which types of students are the most difficult to include, their responses vary by individuals and their experiences and beliefs. The only general pattern I've been able to discern is that many teachers agree that students who are troubled or who are troubling are particularly challenging to include because of classroom disruption. [This speaks poignantly to Question # 8 regarding an effective discipline plan used at a school-wide level.]

15. What do we need to be keeping track of?

Ongoing and responsive evaluation is an integral part of building inclusive and collaborative schools. Some of the variables my colleagues and I are keeping track of include: numbers and types of students being educated in and out of the general education program, number of and types of referrals to special education per year, types of problems solved by the collaborative teams and pairs, the impact of the inclusion on the other students in the classroom, the impact of inclusion on the community, changes in intrapersonal attitudes and beliefs among educators, students and parents, changes in the knowledge base of the faculty, changes in collaborative skills of the faculty, etc.

Final Summary

Responsible and effective inclusion does **not** happen just because it's right or because it might cost less. It happens when people work together collaboratively and build a collective

vision of what they want to create. These 15 questions are some basic ones that may be helpful in helping to build a sound and proactive base.

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